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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

From Rome to New Rome, from Empire to Nation-State

Reopening the Question of Byzantium's Roman Identity

ANTHONY KALDELLIS

*It may seem paradoxical to urge the nationality of the Empire while insisting on its cosmopolitan nature; certainly, if nationality implies a common ethnological past the Byzantines had none. But such a past is not necessary, as today the United States of America is witness; and in Byzantium the tradition inherited from the world-empire of Rome . . . [gave] the Byzantines a national unity that overpowered ethnological divergencies—a national unity far more real than any that was to exist in Western Europe till the days of the Reformation. Every Byzantine citizen, were his blood Greek or Armenian or Slav, was proudly and patriotically conscious that he was *Pavlos*. . . . This nationality even tended to mould its people according to one fixed form; and it is as possible to talk of Byzantine characteristics as to talk of Roman and British characteristics.*

—Steven Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and His Reign*,
1929

WHAT WE CONVENTIONALLY CALL “THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE” TODAY has been called many other things in the annals of western scholarship, including the Empire of Constantinople, the Empire of the Greeks, the medieval Greek Empire, the Orthodox Empire, and, rarely but more correctly, the eastern Roman Empire. Until A.D. 800, western writers had continued to call it the *imperium* or *respublica Romanorum*. All those other terms that emerged after 800 were, in fact, invented specifically to avoid calling “the Byzantines” by their proper name—that is, Romans—and that continues to be their function today even though the need for such evasions has passed. Byzantine Studies is possibly the only field that actively denies the identity of its subjects, and it does so by continuing to ignore basic methodologies that have been in place in the social sciences since the mid-twentieth century. The Byzantines consistently called themselves Romans and could have been offended to be called something else. Moreover, their state had a proper name, Romanía, though we never use it, not because it can be confused with a separate modern country but because we do not believe that the Byzantines were Romans *despite* what they claimed. A leading historian has recently made this clear: “it does not

matter that the Byzantines almost always called it the Roman Empire and themselves Romans.¹

This is, to put it mildly, an awkward position for scholars to be in vis-à-vis their subjects. I have a large file where I collect the reasons that so many have offered, usually in notes, parentheses, or prefaces, for why they do not regard the Byzantines as Romans. These reasons are wildly idiosyncratic and methodologically inconsistent, even contradictory. They are attempts by individual scholars to justify to themselves polemical conventions that they have internalized without knowing the purpose for which they were established in the first place. The irony is that they would have little sympathy for that purpose if they knew its history. While a few historians have resisted these conventions, including J. B. Bury, Steven Runciman (see above), and H.-G. Beck, their observations on the continuity of Roman history have not been taken up by the field in general.

On the other hand, the field is undergoing massive changes, and there is reason to hope that newer generations of scholars will no longer passively accept this negative (and negating) stance. What we need is a rehabilitation of the Byzantines as Romans and an understanding of how that identity structured their culture and shaped (and was shaped by) their history. In the brief space available here I will offer a preliminary albeit novel answer to a big question: What exactly *was* the entity that we call “the Byzantine Empire” and in what way *was* it a “Roman” empire? What sort of thing *was* it—compared, that is, to roughly similar entities—and who did those who lived in it think that they were? This, then, is a question both of modern classification and of the subjective identity claims of our historical subjects. These two aspects should not be discussed independently of each other.

I will begin by contrasting two views of Byzantium: that which prevails more or less universally in the scholarship and its exact opposite, which now seems (to me at least) to be closer to the truth. These are, respectively, the “multiethnic empire with a universal Christian ideology” and “the nation-state of the Roman people.” The theoretical issues involved in adjudicating between the two will then be discussed in the form of an essay of ideas, as it is impossible to present all the relevant evidence here. One additional point of concern will be to explain why the standard view, that which occludes the Roman dimension of Byzantium, emerged at all. And in keeping with the aims of this volume, special attention will be paid to the (allegedly) defining role of Constantinople in the articulation and evolution of Byzantine identity. Paradoxically, the City has been used to argue *against* the Byzantines’ claim that they were true

1. Angold, *Byzantium*, 2. Quotations to this effect can be offered from the works of many historians. Greek scholars have just as casually dismissed the Byzantines’ Roman identity—e.g., Vryonis, “Recent Scholarship on Continuity and Discontinuity.”

Romans. Paul Magdalino has recently attempted to mediate between the two positions. While conceding that “Byzantium developed a relationship between capital and country comparable to that of a centralized modern nation state,” he adds that “the emperor was ‘emperor of the Romans’ because he held power in the ‘Reigning City’ [and that] provincial Byzantines were ‘Romaioi’ because the New Rome was their ‘common fatherland.’”² But were the Romans of Byzantium Romans because of what their emperor and capital were called, or the reverse? Or was their relationship more dialectical? Before defining the role of New Rome in this ideological equation, we must compare different models of what Byzantium was.

According to the dominant view, Byzantium was a multiethnic and multilingual empire whose various territories were united only in being subject to the capital, Constantinople. It was the opposite of a nation-state as its ideology promoted Christian ecumenism; it was an empire with “universal” ambitions (or pretensions), whether territorial or religious. The Byzantines may have claimed that they were Romans, but in fact this meant only that they were Orthodox Christians. They were the True Israel and their history as a community was symbolic and based in the Old Testament. (Constantinople is even called New Jerusalem in a few texts.³) In the political sphere, being Roman meant only (i.e., *was defined and constituted* by the fact) that one was subject to the emperor, who retained the title “emperor of the Romans” for reasons of propaganda. There were no “real” Romans here, as no one spoke Latin. Modern Greek (and Greek-American) nationalist historians have additionally claimed that Byzantium was “really” the medieval phase of the history of the Greek people.⁴ So whereas the Byzantines called themselves Romans, “in reality” many or most of them were actually Greeks who were only prevented from using their proper name by the (contingent) fact that the church had labeled pagans as Greeks, making that label (temporarily) undesirable.

This picture is endorsed in most established scholarship. Every student of Byzantium begins his or her career with a ready-made set of formulas that purport to settle every major issue, allowing scholars to focus on only this emperor, that text, or that icon. But there is now growing dissatisfaction with this model, which takes literally claims made in a restricted set of panegyrical sources and excludes most of what the Byzantines had to say about themselves in order to uphold western narratives of the legacy of Rome. The alternative

2. Magdalino, “Byzantium = Constantinople,” 43.

3. See Fenster, *Laudes Constantinopolitanae*, 97–131. To leave room for the exposition of ideas that have not been advocated before, the references in the notes will be restricted to a minimum.

4. This thesis was proposed in the later nineteenth century by K. Paparrigopoulos and is still widely (though not unanimously) held in Greece. See, more recently, Vryonis, “Recent Scholarship on Continuity and Discontinuity.”

offered here is a model for Byzantium in the middle period—that is, roughly between A.D. 700 and 1200. The ground was set for it by the Roman conquest of the Greek east in the second and first centuries B.C., while the trends that created it gathered force and transformed the ancient world into what we call Byzantium during the first seven centuries A.D. In the later period, by contrast, between 1204 and 1453, it began to fall apart.

In sum, what we call Byzantium was the nation-state of the Romans. It was as much a nation-state as any in the modern period, though it did at times exercise imperial dominion over peoples along its borders. Its extensive core territories were governed, united, and transformed by a dense network of institutions that lay claim to exclusive power in their spheres (military, administrative, judicial, religious, and fiscal) as components of a single political entity whose identity was defined in terms of its population, the Roman people. The proper jurisdiction of those institutions was in theory coextensive with the borders of the state and included all Romans. Being Roman in Byzantium was not a matter of ethnicity, a “mere” legal fact, or an (arbitrary) designation of one’s political “loyalty” to the emperor and the state institutions. It was a national and civic identity that made those institutions possible and legitimate in the first place. In other words, the subjects of the emperor were not Romans because they were subject to the “Roman emperor,” but the opposite: he was the “emperor of the Romans” because his job was to govern the Roman people. He derived his authority and his title from them; they did not derive their collective name from him.⁵ Consider what Theodoros Daphnopates wrote to Symeon of Bulgaria in the early tenth century, when the latter began to refer to himself as emperor of the Romans: “Seizing some of our people prisoner through your raids and conquests will not make you emperor of the Romans. They are not with you of their own free will, but by force and war. They flee from you and come to us, people of their own kind. If some Bulgarians come to us, shall we call ourselves emperors of the Bulgarians? Of which Romans do you call yourself the emperor?”⁶ In another place, Daphnopates claimed “that it was abominable for the Romans to accept as emperor one who was not a Roman.”⁷

Being a Roman meant that one tacitly or openly identified with the social, cultural, and historical consensus that found political expression in the Roman *politeia* or *koinon* (which was how the Byzantines translated the Latin *res publica* of their ancestors). That consensus was formed by a common language, religion, art, social customs, and by the national exclusivity and Roman ideology of all branches of government. These Romans were a nation and Romanía was their state.

5. For a discussion of this reverse view, see Kaldellis, Review of Page, *Being Byzantine*.

6. Theodoros Daphnopates *Ep.* 5 (pp. 58–59, Darrouzès and Westerink).

7. Published in Jenkins, “The Peace with Bulgaria,” 291.

This alternative model will certainly encounter opposition, though I am encouraged by its favorable reception at many academic gatherings. As it turns out, the “conventional” view of Byzantium has never been systematically proven or theoretically grounded in the first place, something that would require a critical review of the evidence and a scrutiny of the concepts involved (what do we mean by “multiethnic empire,” *oikoumene*, etc.?). We have only formulaic repetitions of a doctrine that has been established through accumulated authority and because it serves (or rather once served) powerful ideological interests. That the issue has generated no sustained discussions is freely admitted by advocates of the standard view, which in their mind is not a problem because the case is so obvious.⁸ It is anything but that. But Byzantine Studies is a notoriously conservative field that, with the exception of some isolated studies, has not yet given a high priority to the critical scrutiny of its origins and history.⁹ But the field does now have to evaluate critically the concepts on which it has erected its edifices. So let us review some of the major concepts that are in play in the two views contrasted above.

We begin with “ethnicity.” Byzantium was clearly not a “multiethnic empire” in the same way that the Persian, (early) Roman, Ottoman, and Holy Roman empires were. In those empires it is possible to discern various groups that had a more or less conscious sense of their distinctiveness from each other and from the ruling group, whatever the exact basis of their cohesion in each case (religious, ethnic, tribal, political, etc.). What pass for such subgroups in Byzantium are an illusion. The vast majority of the population were Romans differentiated only by region—in other words, they were Romans from Greece, Thrace, Kappadokia, Paphlagonia, and so on. There may even have been stereotypes, usually negative (as these things usually go), attached to some of these regions. But being a “Paphlagonian” in Byzantium was not an ethnic identity that competed with the Roman norm; it only inflected it, and was like being from the Midwest or East Coast in the contemporary United States. There was and is no way to identify the ruling “Romans” of the empire as opposed to their Greek, Thracian, or Kilikian subjects; the very idea is absurd. Every Byzantinist will recognize that the following picture of Asia Minor in the mid-eleventh century, taken from a modern historical novel, is horribly wrong: the land, we hear, was populated “by ancient tribes who acknowledged the eastern emperor as their lord, paying him tribute, but no loyalty.”¹⁰ No such ancient tribes can be identified. Yet this is precisely the impression that we give to non-specialists by all our loose talk about the “multiethnic empire.”

8. E.g., Angold, “Autobiography,” 36.

9. Despite its valuable contributions, from a philosophical and critical point of view Cormack and Jeffreys, *Through the Looking Glass*, was a missed opportunity.

10. Rathbone, *The Last English King*, 21.

From a *genetic* point of view, the population was of course heterogeneous, being composed of the descendants of many ancient peoples and their mixtures, but this is true of all modern nations, whether they recognize it or not. Many Byzantine historians and intellectuals knew this, and, I suspect, so did many non-intellectuals. But they were not much interested in their ethnic background (as the majority of white America is not profoundly interested in the precise origin of its ancestors). There was, by contrast, a sharper sense that some people had been assimilated to Romanía from more recently incorporated groups, such as Scandinavians, Armenians, Slavs, Persians, and Arabs, and so on. Here our scholarship creates confusion by calling these people, in obedience to the needs of modern nationalism, "Armenians," "Bulgarians," "Arabs," and so on. In the vast majority of cases, however, what they should be called are Romans of Armenian descent (or Slavic, or whatever it might be), and in most cases they should not be called that at all without good reason. There is every indication that they or their immediate descendants were fully assimilated to the customs, language, religion, and social consensus that maintained—and, in fact, constituted—the (Byzantine) Roman nation. It makes as much sense to call the emperors Herakleios or Basileios I "Armenians" as it does to call president Bill Clinton an "Englishman" or Barack Obama a "Kenyan"—even less so, in fact, as the former ethnic attributions are mostly conjectural on our part.¹¹ There is no evidence that these emperors spoke their supposed "ancestral languages" or knew much about the customs of their supposed ancestor. Yet since Roman national claims have never been taken seriously, Byzantinists have filled the gap with modern ones. It is also no coincidence that modern historians will label a Byzantine as an "Armenian" (or the like) overwhelmingly in cases when a modern nation corresponding to that label still exists and presses its ethnic claims to the past. Peoples who have since lost their lobbying power—for example, Goths, Pechenegs, and many others—have curiously lost their right to similarly colonize the Byzantine "assimilated" subject. This discrepancy reveals the modern dynamic behind this ethnicizing discourse.

There were in Byzantium, at all times, various groups that did not or did not want to assimilate fully to Roman society—for example, resident Arab and Latin merchants, some of the Jews of the empire, some of its Slavic subjects (the Bulgarians during the years 1018–1185), many Armenians in the eleventh century (and before), and others. Their existence and distinctive identities do not have to be denied by the national model for Roman society. All modern nations harbor such groups, sometimes up to half their population, without calling their existence as nations into question. They are called *minorities* and provide

many opportunities for fascinating research. Their history in Byzantium has yet to be written from a standpoint that is free of modern nationalism, but that is in part because the history of the (Byzantine) Roman nation has also not been written. Our sources make it abundantly clear that not all subjects of the emperor in Constantinople were Romans. Not everyone who served the emperor was regarded as a Roman.¹² Instead of the "multiethnic empire," we should consider the model of a national polity of the Romans exercising imperial dominion over other peoples at various times: peoples whom it did not accept as Romans unless they assimilated to the cultural (i.e., national) norms of the Roman *politeia*.

The second key term is "nation." Obviously, there is too much theoretical ground to cover here.¹³ I will address only some common concerns. Two different sets of scholars have denied that Byzantium was a nation, but independently of each other. On the one hand, many past theorists of the nation asserted that national identity and states were exclusively modern phenomena, sometimes by linking them to industrialism. This implicitly barred Byzantium from being a nation-state. However, those theorists were ignorant of the evidence for ancient and medieval societies, certainly at first hand. Their definitions, when applied to those societies, seemed in some cases to fit quite well. That is why a considerable (non-nationalist) literature has appeared in the past two decades that affirms the possibility of premodern nations.¹⁴ On the other hand, that Byzantium was a nation-state has been explicitly denied by some Byzantinists, though they have, conversely, generally been ignorant of the theoretical literature on nations and nation-states.

In a study under preparation, I intend to argue that the Byzantines fit modern theoretical definitions for being a nation, and that they should join the rapidly expanding list of ancient and medieval peoples that are so understood. But some more common concerns may be allayed here in anticipation. First, we should be careful not to let the (legitimate) concern to avoid anachronism become an obstacle that prevents us from seeing genuine connections between different periods. One common way to appear sophisticated among scholars is to assert that this or that category of human existence as we know it—for example, "art," "religion," "atheism," "mythology," "national identity," "economics," or what have you—is really only a modern invention, dating from the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and so

12. Many examples in Page, *Being Byzantine*.

13. The theoretical literature is of two types. One views nations historically and categorizes them. The other performs a theoretical deconstruction of national ideology, to which it is often hostile. The result is a somewhat schizophrenic field.

14. There are now studies of ancient and medieval nations and nation-states as well as critiques of past modernist assumptions.

11. See now Kaegi, *Heraklius*, 21: "We have no evidence on what Armenian consciousness, if any . . . Heraclius possessed." Yet the ethnic model is maintained.

on. The effect is to destabilize human existence into a random set of incomensurable historical states divided by unbridgeable cognitive gaps. But most of these claims are so absolute that they can be refuted by only one solid counter-example or, better, by paying attention to the *special* way in which the category is defined to produce, through reverse engineering, the initially startling claim (e.g., “art” is defined in terms of the contingent circumstances of the past century, thus precluding premodern art by definition). Second, in the case of national identity, we must avoid the error of setting *much higher standards* for a premodern candidate to meet than are used in the discussion of modern cases. It seems silly to have to say it, but we must use the same standards. For example, a Byzantine whose loyalties were “ambiguous” or “local” would no more call Romania into question than an ambiguous Frenchman calls the French nation into question.

To prove conclusively that Byzantium actually was a nation-state I would have to bring forward and discuss evidence from the sources that validates modern models of national identity and statehood. Here I will simply cite a modern definition of a nation-state in which most Byzantinists will recognize the society they study through its sources. It is enough for now that Byzantium be recognized as *something like* a nation-state because this by itself refutes the view that it was *totally unlike* a nation-state. Nation-states, then, require a sense of political community, “however tenuous,” and “some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community”; also, a territory controlled by the state and valorized by religious or historic associations; and “a measure of common values and traditions among the population, or at any rate its ‘core’ community.” Byzantium easily fulfills these requirements, with its single dominant language, religion, state apparatus, and homogeneous culture.¹⁵

As for the now-mandatory requirement of having an “imagined community,”¹⁶ it is likewise true that in the core regions, and regardless of whether they hailed from Naupaktos or Attaleia, or of whether they knew each other personally, the Byzantines overwhelmingly spoke the same language, prayed in the same type of churches, obeyed the same laws and magistrates, served in the same army, shared the same calendar, festivals, weights and measures, coins, taxes, courts, archives, social and political opportunities as every other Byzantine elsewhere; in a word, they shared what our sources repeatedly and emphatically call “Roman customs.” Official statements such as posted imperial rescripts, property assessments and tax receipts, annual loyalty oaths, and the tax census defined and continually reenacted and reinforced Roman

15. Smith, *National Identity*, 8–15. The definition is banal; its like can be found in many works on the subject.

16. Contributed to the debate by Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

identity in different contexts, collective and individual.¹⁷ Moreover, each Byzantine knew that he had all these things in common with all other Byzantines elsewhere and believed that they were all Romans by virtue of the very fact that they did so. There were no viable competing notions that could fracture this consensus—for instance, ethnic divisions or fixed social classes as existed in almost all other “empires,” certainly “multiethnic” ones. All this made Byzantium the most unified imagined community of its size in the Middle Ages. (And perhaps we should not call Byzantium an empire any more, as there is a tendency to assume that all empires are by definition “multiethnic” in a manner, presumably, that modern nations are not.¹⁸) Many historians who are beginning to think critically about the odd cluster of terms by which Byzantium has been traditionally defined are coming to similar conclusions. In a magisterial survey of the early Middle Ages, Chris Wickham notes that some national identities did exist and adds that “Byzantine ‘national identity’ has not been much considered by historians, for that empire was the ancestor of no modern nation state, but it is arguable that it was the most developed in Europe at the end of our period.”¹⁹

From ethnicity and nationality I turn to religion, certainly a major area of concern in Byzantine Studies, but one that has introduced a fundamental confusion of categories. Many Byzantinists assert that being Roman in Byzantium really meant that one was Orthodox Christian, that being Roman had no independent value for the Byzantines other than this. To be sure, Orthodoxy was a necessary component of Byzantine national identity, but it was hardly sufficient and was certainly not equated with what it meant to be Roman. This is shown by the fact that the Byzantines recognized the existence of other Orthodox peoples but did not consider them Romans. These peoples were routinely called “barbarians,” even if only in a neutral sense (like that used in modern book titles). Despite the brilliance and popularity of D. Obolensky’s study of *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, which traces the contours and history of a mostly religious continuum, its author could find no evidence that the Byzantines ever thought in such terms. For the Byzantines, Serbs and converted Rus’ were just as barbaric and non-Roman as the Latins and the Arabs; and Obolensky found little or no evidence that Orthodoxy translated into any kind of closer ties on the social and political levels, even in terms of military alliances against the non-Orthodox. Being Roman was not an analytical category equivalent to being Orthodox. This also explains how Byzantine writers could attack pagan or heretical emperors as “enemies of the Christians” while conceding that they were simultaneously good administrators of Roman affairs.

17. For a striking instance far from what I have called the core territories, see McCormick, “The Imperial Edge.” The historical basis for this development is discussed by Ando, *Imperial Ideology*.

18. E.g., by Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers*, 38.

19. Wickham, *Inheritance of Rome*, 4–5.

The Byzantines also had a coherent view of their collective history as Romans. To be sure, the complexity of their culture enabled a number of “usable pasts,” depending on the specific site in which each text was operating. For example, as a Christian community they could imagine themselves as a New Israel, a group that could include non-Roman Christians. The history recorded in the Old Testament served as model for the history of any people chosen by God, and here there could be some slippage between the terms Roman and Christian as, in practice, most of the time there was no reason to distinguish them (especially when the empire was surrounded by non-Christian peoples). There was also the classical Greek past, which provided models of natural virtue, literature, and philosophy, and was always on the minds of the educated. These two pasts, however, were, respectively, symbolic and literary. A different kind of past, one that played a role in a national ideology, was the story of the Roman people from the Trojan War to the Byzantine present.

When the Byzantines considered themselves as a national community, they turned not to Israel or Greece but to Rome. The history of Rome began for them with the Trojan War and continued through the period of the kings, the republic, and the empire of which they were the direct heirs. For the Byzantines there was no radical break in continuity between Romulus and, say, Constantine IX Monomachos—only a change in the type of regime by which the Roman polity was governed (from monarchy to aristocracy or democracy and then back to monarchy). The Roman nation, in their view, existed for centuries primarily in Italy, then around the Mediterranean, then primarily in the east: this was how the history of “Rome” was written by them. The ancestral language of the Romans, they knew, was Latin; then for centuries it was both Latin and Greek; and finally the nation became monolingual in Greek (in the tenth century, the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos dated the final transition to the early seventh century).²⁰ Most of their governmental, political, legal, and military institutions, along with many of their social customs, were recognizably Roman in origin and had been transplanted to the east, just as Constantine had decided to found a New Rome on the Bosphorus. A major component of my study in progress will be to show that the Byzantines had a specifically Roman view of their political sphere, what they called the *politeia*, which was a translation and extension of Latin *respublica*. This was the most important concept in the Byzantines’ political ontology (along with the *basileia*), and it referred not to the type of regime that governed the political sphere—only in modern times has “republic” come to designate non-monarchical regimes exclusively—but rather to its source of legitimacy, which was the Roman people.²¹

20. Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *On the Themes* I pr. (p. 60, ed. Pertusi).

21. For the modern evolution of *respublica*, see Hankins, “Exclusivist Republicanism.” For its use in Cicero to refer to the source of political legitimacy, see Schofield, “Cicero’s Definition.”

Romanía, then, was the only *direct* continuation of the ancient *respublica*, and not merely an ideological “reception” or “revival” such as we find in the medieval west and, in general, in any other time and place where the Roman legacy has been claimed. The imperial idea in the west was, anyhow, a bizarre distortion: being an emperor in the west meant that one ruled over more than one kingdom,²² whereas in the ancient and Byzantine Roman tradition it meant that one was the chief executive of a particular *respublica*—in this case, that of the Romans, namely of a national group. The Roman name is ubiquitous in historical narratives, appearing on almost every page. It is mentioned in connection with boundaries, laws, and customs. It was affixed to the title of the sovereign, the capital (New Rome), and the name of the state itself (Romanía), and invoked in official documents, coins, sundry proclamations, ceremonies, and the Christian liturgy, not merely in the capital but throughout the national territory. In sum, the burden of proof rests entirely with those who assert that the Byzantines did not have a fully developed Roman identity, and it is unclear where they can find evidence of sufficient weight to maintain that denial given how strongly the Byzantines insisted on what they believed about themselves.

A full elaboration of this model will have to present in detail the evidence for “Roman customs,” specifically for how the Byzantines marshaled them as markers of a coherent and recognizably “national” identity, and will also have to confront a range of secondary concepts that have been deployed in support of the traditional model (especially the alleged “universalism” of Byzantium). For now, in keeping with the theme of this volume, I turn to the problem of the relationship between New Rome and Romanía—that is, between the capital of the eastern empire and the nation-state of which it was the capital. Was it true, as Magdalino proposes, that “it was the status of Constantinople as the New Rome which made it legitimate for Byzantines to call themselves *Romaioi* and their state *Romania*”?²³

There is no question that Constantinople was historically very important for Byzantium. Indeed, at times the Byzantine Empire was more like a vast city-state than an “empire” by any conventional understanding of that term; on some occasions, the very survival of the empire hinged on the survival of the capital. So much (and more) we may grant without, however, conceding the case that has been often made about the ideological importance of the City.²⁴ We must be

22. Cf. Bachrach, “Pirenne and Charlemagne,” 219.

23. Magdalino, “Constantinople and the Outside World,” 151.

24. An article that is still often cited and reprinted that ascribes an (inordinate) *ideological* importance to Constantinople, and which claims that the Byzantines were unable to view their state in non-theological terms, is Alexander, “The Strength of Empire.”

very careful to distinguish between historical centrality (military or defensive, administrative, political, financial, ecclesiastical, etc.) and ideology—in this case, the ideology that had created and sustained Romanía. Now, Magdalino is not among those who deny that the Byzantines were Romans, though he has nowhere fully explained what they may have meant by that other than that their capital was New Rome. But when the Roman element is excised from Byzantium, what is left does appear to be an artificial territorial entity held together only by the center of power. Being subject to the regime in Constantinople wrongly acquires the status of a *definition* of what it meant to be a Roman in Byzantium, rather than, what I believe it was, only an *indication*—one way among many others of tracking who was a Roman. That is in part why so many studies have asserted that Byzantium was nothing other than Constantinople and the lands that it ruled. Michael Angold, for example, has recently repeated that, on the one hand, “abandoning Rome and the west to the barbarians meant that Romanitas—what it meant to be a Roman—was being drained of meaning” while, on the other hand, “Byzantium was a single city, which was more or less identical with the empire. We can see that its imperial claims were largely an illusion kept alive by a mastery of ceremonial.”²⁵

The problem here is partly caused by disciplinary boundaries. Magdalino and Angold are historians of the middle period of Byzantium, not the ancient Roman empire or even Late Antiquity. If they were, they would know that Roman identity had, long before Constantine founded New Rome, ceased to be linked to the physical city of Rome, and that the Byzantines’ abandonment of its empty shell in the eighth century was even more irrelevant to their own sense of being Roman. To flesh out this argument, we have to return to the period in which this volume begins: the fourth century. That was when New Rome was founded and also when we find the first instances of the Greek term *Romanía* to refer to the entirety of the Roman world—in Latin, the *orbis Romanus*, or what the Byzantines would call their national state thereafter (referring to the “needs of Romanía,” the “boundaries of Romanía,” etc.). This refutes a common misconception that places the origin of that term in the sixth century. In fact, our fourth-century sources, which are not government documents, refer to it in such offhand ways that we must conclude that it was in common use since at least 300, possibly before.²⁶ Grant Parker has written that “the birth of the name Romanía in the fourth century testifies to the need to distinguish between the City and what had by now become a world empire. It is no coincidence that this came into use only once the city of Rome ceased to hold the

monopoly of power it did at the time of Augustus.”²⁷ But what is a “world empire”? What we are really dealing with is the assumption of a primary Roman identity by the vast majority of the free population of the empire.

By the time that Constantine decided to found New Rome, “Rome” had arguably already become only a symbolic center for the primary object of provincial loyalty, which was “Romanía.” The city of Rome itself (the one in Italy) had ceased to be the political capital of the empire, contained a tiny fraction of all Romans in the *oikoumene*, and did not supply a large number of the men who governed the empire and set its norms. According to one rhetorical cliché of Late Antiquity, Rome had made the world into a city, and that world had now become the common *patris* or *patria* of all.²⁸ In the generations before Constantine, when emperors ceased to reside at Rome, we find a proliferation of provincial cities hosting the court and being called “New Romes.”²⁹ Any place in Romanía could now claim the name, for the idea of Rome had been detached from the city itself. The marginalization of the center matched the Romanization of the provinces. That process was still ongoing in the early fourth century, but had progressed far enough that it must provide the context for the ideological significance of the new capital. Constantinople was meant by Constantine to be, or at any rate soon became, basically a branch office of Rome in the east.³⁰ It was meant to be Rome and was even imagined as a replica of it (even physically and certainly institutionally); despite resentment, no one seriously disputed the claim then (except, in one specific sense, for the bishop of Rome) or denied that such a thing could be done. In Late Antiquity (as among modern historians), “it gradually came to be accepted that Rome might still be Rome without its western half—as indeed turned out to be the case.”³¹ And the Byzantines certainly continued to believe this strongly until 1453. It is not our right to refute them; at least, we are not acting as historians when we attempt to do so.

The foundation of a Rome on the Bosphorus meant something different in A.D. 330 than what it would have meant, say, in the first century A.D. It was not a branch office of a foreign power ruling over native “ethnics,” but an imperial city that rapidly became a capital for all the Romans of the east, many of whom were recruited to its senate, bureaucracy, and armies. It was precisely the pre-existence of Romanía in the east—all those millions of Romans, who had internalized the norms of the *politeia*—that made the phenomenon that we know as

27. Parker, *Making of Roman India*, 207, citing previous scholarship.

28. For some sample quotations, Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 46. The meaning behind this phrase is brought out by Ando, *Imperial Ideology*.

29. For some examples, Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 51–52; see also the Introduction q.v., 7–8, 11.

30. See Dagron, *Naissance*; Calderone, “Costantinopoli: la ‘seconda Roma.’”

31. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 14, 101 (“Rome, by which we now mean Constantinople”).

25. Angold, *Byzantium*, 20, 144, respectively.

26. Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum*, 35; the *Passion of St. Sabba* 4.2, 8.1, tr. in Heather and Matthews, *Goths*, 114, 117.

Constantinople possible, not the reverse. Elder Rome had created a Roman world in the east, and it was this world that enabled the construction of, and gave meaning to, “New Rome,” at least the meaning it would have for the Byzantines. It was, then, not the case that the Byzantine were only *called* Romans because they *happened* to be ruled by a city that was *called* New Rome. The relationship between City and provincial Roman identity was more complex than that and had a much longer prehistory.

Accordingly, this brings us to a complex and contested theoretical problem: the Romanization of the east. Romanization in general is a highly controversial term, and is approached differently depending on whether one is working primarily with archaeological or textual material and on whether one focuses on the policies of the center or adopts a postcolonial perspective.³² It is not my intention to advocate one or another definition or approach here as the only correct one, only to note that this debate has so far been conducted among classicists and ancient historians who have not considered the implications of the very existence of the Byzantine “Romans” whose polity was the result of whatever process was under way within the ancient empire. From this viewpoint, Romanization signals a profound ideological and political shift in the provincial populations, not something that can always be tracked through material remains. In the end, it was not so much about baths, hippodromes, arches, and shaving (though it was also about those things); it was about coming to believe that you were a Roman whereas before you might have been a Greek (or whatever), of shedding any prior national, tribal, ethnic, religious, and even civic identities and memories that potentially conflicted with being Roman.³³ “New” Romans from Gaul, for instance, amazingly soon after the conquest looked back to Caesar as their “ancestor” and not to Vercingetorix.³⁴ Rome now represented a system of normative values that the provincials accepted as exercising legitimate authority over them. But this “Rome” was not quite the same as the city of Rome; it was the collective society of Romans who lived throughout the empire, or, as the Byzantines called it, *Romanía*.

This is what happened during Late Antiquity in the regions that concern us. In the second century A.D., there were still sophists and intellectuals who were trying to defend various notions of Greek identity in the face of what scholars call “Roman power.” To sketch a long process in a few strokes, in the second half of that century we find the first writer of Greek of eastern origin, Lucian, refer to the Romans in the first-person plural (in his satirical work on *How*

History Should Be Written).³⁵ By the early third century, we have a Greek-speaking Roman senator from Bithynia (but resident in Rome), Dio Cassius, who wrote a history of his city (Rome) in Greek, where he betrays no sense that he was in any way less or differently Roman than his senatorial colleagues from Italy. He certainly knew Latin (the first Roman historian, Fabius Pictor, in the second century B.C., had also written his Roman history in Greek). Since A.D. 212, all free inhabitants of the empire were Roman citizens. By the fourth century we find the use of the term *Romanía* to designate the *patris* of all Romans throughout the empire. By then it was only Libanios and perhaps a few others who were willing to call themselves Greeks in a way that set them apart from Romans.³⁶ After 400, there were hardly any enclaves of ethnic separatism in the lands that would become Byzantium, and even those (e.g., the Isaurians) did not hold out for long. Certainly there were no ethnic “Greeks” left.

This aspect of Romanization—what might be, but has not yet been, dubbed “the making of Byzantium”—was one of the most far-reaching transformations that occurred in the ancient world, yet it has received amazingly little study, being overshadowed by its more attention-grabbing contemporary, Christianization. One reason for this is, again, a disciplinary break, this time operating in the opposite direction. The revival of interest in the Second Sophistic has enlisted the energies of classicists to study a “later” period, but classicists study that material *looking back* to antiquity and not *forward* to Byzantium. They generally know little about what happened after Philostratos, especially in terms of the dynamic between Greek and Roman identities that I sketched above (Philostratos coined the term Second Sophistic, wrote its history, and therefore functions as its terminus). This distorts our picture of the second century, which is treated as a period of a robust Greek cultural revival and, in some cases, opposition to “Roman power.” In reality, this aspect of the Second Sophistic disguised the death throes of Greek identity. On the other side of the great divide that is the mysterious third century, we have scholars of Late Antiquity and Byzantium. But they have not been interested in the question of the demise of Greek identity (the version of Greek identity that classicists are interested in, not its Christian redefinition) because by this time it was a mute question: almost all subjects were already Romans (in terms of identity, not merely legal status). And so the former group generally does not know (or has avoided) the fact that its subject dynamic was about to become extinct, while the latter do not care about it because by, say, A.D. 300, it had already become extinct (and other historical trends claim their interest in the fourth century, such as “holy men”).

32. See the (not always impartial) synthesis in Hingley, *Globalizing Roman Culture*. For a critique of postcolonial approaches, see S. Dmitriev, “(Re-)constructing the Roman Empire.”

33. An excellent introduction to this process is Ando, *Imperial Ideology*.

34. Woolf, *Becoming Roman*; for the erasure of pre-Roman memories in the east, see Millar, *Roman Near East*; Wood, ‘We Have No King’.

35. In sections 14, 17, 29, 31, cited and discussed by Swain, *Hellenism*, 313.

36. For the debate over Hellenism on the pagan side in the fourth century, see Dagron, “L’empire romain d’orient.”

It is time for Byzantinists to claim more territory for their field and reach into the second century as a proto-Byzantine period, rather than concede more and more ground to “Late Antiquity.” For instance, Polymnia Athanassiadi has offered a striking interpretation of Ailius / Aelius Aristeides, a man steeped in Hellenic culture, also an admirer of Rome who wrote a programmatic statement on behalf of emerging Romanía, and who was renamed as *Theodoros* in a dream by his personal healing god, Asklepios (“tel un moine byzantin”)!³⁷ This man was a Byzantine in all but name, incarnating in his person the complex articulation of Byzantine culture. If, then, we look past the chronological breaks imposed by the academic division of labor and consider what the sheer fact of Byzantium must mean for our understanding of ancient developments, we can discern crucial trends in the evolution of Roman identity even in antiquity itself that remain invisible if those breaks are respected. By looking at Byzantine Romanía we can devise a new context for interpreting the transition from pagan Rome on the Tiber to Christian New Rome on the Bosphorus.

A second line of reasoning, based in turn on the Byzantine evidence, would go as follows. The Byzantines did not forget the theoretical and historical independence of people, City, and territory. The overwhelming majority of Byzantine Romans did not live in the capital and yet were just as Roman as those who did. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the policymakers, officials, and even emperors in the capital were themselves of provincial origin. Constantinopolitans were not a separate class or ethnic group, their urban snobbery notwithstanding.³⁸ So what went on in Constantinople in a very real sense gave historical and institutional expression to the broad consensus of Roman provincial society. It was the national capital.

The Byzantines knew that the capital had been moved in the past without abolishing the basic continuity of the Roman polity. And when Constantinople was lost in 1204, the Byzantines regrouped at Nikaia and other places. They did not cease calling themselves Romans and explicitly proclaimed to their enemies that their being Romans had nothing to do with possessing the City (though certainly they desired it greatly). No less a figure than Ioannes III Doukas Batatzes declared to Pope Gregorius IX in 1239 that “he who is emperor rules over a nation (*ethnos*) and a people (*laos*) . . . and not over rocks and wooden beams, of which walls and towers are made [i.e., of the City].”³⁹ The Byzantines’ Roman identity had deeper roots than our scholarship has yet imagined; it was not merely a function of Constantinople.

37. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique*, 37–38; the text is *Sacred Tales* 4.53.

38. Cf. Magdalino, “Byzantine Snobbery.” This essay is nicely complemented by Ševčenko, “Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces.”

39. Ioannes III Doukas Batatzes, *Letter to Pope Gregorius IX* (p. 375). For (Byzantine) Roman nationalism after 1204, see Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, ch. 6.

We should not, however, underestimate the importance of Constantinople. Many Byzantine orators did sometimes give the impression that the empire was Constantinople, a City they praised in superlative terms. Men of the capital themselves, they sometimes forgot to talk about the rest of Romanía. On the level of ideology and rhetoric, Constantinople was not merely a place with the highest concentration of Romans but was also endowed with a significance that no other region in the empire possessed. Historically, too, the state did on occasion sacrifice provinces to protect the capital (though usually this made good strategic sense). And the passion with which they sought to regain it after 1204 revealed something more than strategic planning. Not all the territory of the nation was valorized equally. Constantinople held a unique and surpassing position. But this does not affect the overall argument.

Modern nations likewise do not configure and valorize their territories in consistent ways. As centers of power and state formation, many modern capitals rival the role that Constantinople played in Romanía. And the ideological aspect is also not unparalleled. Consider the emotional importance of Kosovo for Serbia or Jerusalem for Israel—contested places labeled by spokesmen in either country as the “heartland of our nation and religion.” Holy places and nationalism are hardly incompatible. In 2006, a Serbian bishop called Kosovo “our spiritual and cultural cradle, our Jerusalem.”⁴⁰ Constantinople was described in similar terms by some Byzantines, precisely as a New Jerusalem. But such expressions were in part made possible by the fact that they were under no pressure to imagine the Roman nation apart from its capital. After 1204, they were forced to make that leap, and then we see, again, what it was that mattered underneath the rhetoric. (The Serbs also have to cope with the loss of their “spiritual and cultural cradle,” yet just as in the Byzantine case, this will certainly not result in the dissolution of their nation.)

Much work remains to be done. The present contribution only sketches the outlines of an argument that creates theoretical space for a new interpretation of Byzantium and provides a deeper background against which to understand the symbolic role of its capital, New Rome, in the articulation of its Roman identity. The primary evidence now has to be interrogated as to the historical modalities and ideologies of this identity; the institutions that created and sustained Romanía; the place of the emperor, capital, and state in its maintenance; the historical process through which it emerged in Late Antiquity; the history of its evolution and eventual dissolution; and the causes of the modern suppression of its very existence. Only then may we discuss its practical limitations and ideological contradictions, which all identities at such a level of

40. *Kathimerini* (English ed.), 29 June 2006.

abstraction exhibit, and determine its unique qualities against the background of modern theory. This will be a great labor, but it is a necessary one. A civilization as important as that of Byzantium can no longer be hidden behind denaturing labels and imprecise concepts. One day the Romans of Byzantium will take their place among the peoples who are known to have lived in this world.

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